Delving into the Problem of the Present Simple Tense Acquisition in Spanish Secondary Education: Some Theoretical Considerations

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Abstract This paper is aimed at providing a comprehensive theoretical overview of numerous aspects concerning present simple affirmative sentence in order to look for new innovative directions towards the improvement of this type of structures in Spanish students pertaining to the General Compulsory Secondary Education. In order to do so, we will delve into theoretical key points that can underpin a further potential teaching proposal. Thus, first we will gain an insight into grammar teaching in the current Spanish educational system. Then we will deal with ground-breaking elements in current teaching. After this, we will review the historical treatment of the error in the teaching of grammar. To conclude, we will present a substantiated discussion of the typology of errors that students often commit with present simple tense. The conclusion shed lights on the possibility of developing potential projects or teaching units whose treatment of the present simple tense embraces the theoretical underpinnings discussed in this paper.

Keywords: common errors in English present simple, grammar error analysis, interlanguage, subject-verb agreement, teaching innovation

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1. Introduction: Justification from the Practice

The idea for the following paper came out after a period of internship at a Spanish school in Murcia, located in the south east of Spain. In this period, we noticed a lack of control on the side of some students over present simple tense. Therefore, since it is considered to be one of the most elementary grammar elements in the Spanish curriculum, it must be a priority for teachers to come up with fresh ideas in order to improve subject-verb agreement in present simple structures. In addition, since the focus of study has been General Compulsory Secondary Education, it is deemed essential that activities introduce an innovative character as a way to keep students' interest awaken, which is one of the biggest concerns in the current educational system.

Yet the issue might seem a simple one to deal with, the reality in the classrooms is that students tend to show a weak understanding of the principles that govern one of the most basic grammar tenets in the English language - the present simple. Therefore, a deeper study on the matter must be taken in order to throw lights on the different mistakes that students commit at school.

Although the teaching of grammar has been fiercely criticised on the grounds of students not presenting better results, the trend nowadays is that there is a growing acknowledgment of the importance of grammar in the process of teaching and learning. Following Nayan [1], both the subject and the verb are the most important elements when we build up a sentence.

Additionally, it should be mentioned that Royal Decree 1105/2014, 26th of December [2] whereby the basic curriculum for the General Compulsory Secondary Education and Bachillerato is established, stipulates that present tense and its time expressions are basic contents within the syntactic-discursive elements of each of the school stages. In addition, we find Decrees 220/221/2015, 2nd of September [3], which establishes that in order to overcome the concept of language as a system governed by rules is essential to pay more attention to the communicative process. In this line, the law guarantees that 50% of the school time will be invested on oral practice and interaction. In this respect, and taking into account that Bachillerato 2nd is special compared with the others (propaedeutic course to get access to University). Therefore, teaching grammar seems to have little room in Bachillerato stages. However, the system does not take into account the fact that in order to successfully execute speech, students must have some control over the basic elements of the language that they are producing.

This topic has been widely discussed by scholars. For instance, Krashen's [4] theory of the second language (henceforth L2) acquisition stated that the learning of a second language comes as the result of two phases: (i) a process whereby information is taken in naturally and unconsciously and; (ii) a process whereby information is taken in and automatized in the language through rules explanation and awareness of the mistakes committed. Somewhat, this theory was the responsible for the decline of grammar-based sessions in the EFL classroom.

Other scholars, such as McLaughlin [5] differed from Krashen's proposal on the grounds that it was a model based on subjective experience and it could not be empirically proven. In this sense, McLaughlin stressed the importance of the internalisation of grammar structures as a process whereby it was necessary a grammar explanation so that structures could be put into practice and then be automatized.

Following Gutiérrez [6], there are other alternatives –though analogous- to the models previously mentioned. In this sense, the scholar postulated that the storage of information in the teaching and learning process of the L2 could be described in terms of explicit and implicit knowledge. While explicit knowledge is in charge of automatizing and storing any rule, implicit knowledge takes place when practising. Moreover, the transmission from explicit to implicit knowledge is carried out through repeated practice.

In the same line, we could make reference to Anderson's [7] cognitive theory. This theory regarded language as a means of communication, in which the child develops two different types of knowledge: declarative and procedural knowledge. Declarative knowledge refers to the knowledge about the language system, its rules and linguistic patterns while procedurals knowledge (how to do something) refers to the knowledge of the language. In this vein, it is necessary to apply strategies and procedures in order to understand and produce a language by applying the declarative knowledge.

Therefore, in spite of numerous theories that try to provide an explanation for language acquisition, teaching grammar seems to be an indispensable condition in the acquisition of the L2, let alone in General Compulsory Secondary Education, where grammar problems involving present simple tense were notoriously significant.

Ellis [8] on his side, puts forward that as far as language correction is concerned, grammar rules are part and parcel of the explicit knowledge underlying in the learner which in turn contribute to the improvement of the implicit knowledge, responsible for natural productions and self-corrections. Hence, it is understandable that formal instruction contributes to a quicker acquisition and improvement of implicit knowledge.

According to Nayan [1], the resources par excellent since the beginning of the XXI century have been much of the same that those that had been used decades ago. It is undeniable that teachers are forced to make use of new technologies in the classroom. However, the mere use of technology does not necessarily imply that they are being innovative. Rather than that, teacher must, on the one hand, engage students in the use of technologies so that they acquire long life competences on their won and, on the other hand, use technologies in order to appeal the different learning styles in a given classroom.

In fact, the law makes special emphasis on fostering Digital Competence and Sense of Initiative and Entrepreneurship in students, which certainly comply with idea suggested in the previous paragraph. Traditional methodologies have always stood out for being quite linear, teacher-based which did not take into account the individual differences in the classroom. However, nowadays the law urges teachers to become counsellors and facilitators of knowledge, who must always bear in mind the diversity in the classroom and thus must cater for them. In this vein, it is fundamental to make use of other resources which are not necessarily related to technologies. For instance, we can work on Gardner's [9] Multiple Intelligences, which we will develop in further sections or Fleming and Mills's VARK model [10]. The initials of VARK stand for 'Visual learning', 'Auditory learning', 'Read and write learning' and 'Kinesthetic learning', depending on the students' preferences of learning, which will be also develop further on.

All in all, this theoretical review does not intend to emphasise some resources over others, but to serve as a guide to raise awareness and enable teachers to use and combine different resources and methodologies in order to benefit the central element of the education system: the student.

2. The Importance of Grammar in the EFL Teaching in the Current Spanish Educational Panorama

It is a well-known fact that the grammar-translation method has always dominated the education panorama as far as teaching of a foreign language is concerned. However, with the advent of the audio-lingual method by the second half of the 20th century, grammar rules were reduced to just repetition and substitution drills, without any further grammar explanation.

Hymes [11] introduced the notion of communicative competence, later extended by and Canale and Swain [12]. By the middle of the 1976s, Krashen and his second language acquisition theory, the so-called Monitor Hypothesis, burst in the education panorama and enacted that as children learned the language without explanation of the grammar rules, so should learners do. This gave birth to a new perspective in SLA, such as the Communicative Method, which focused on fluency at the expense of grammar accuracy.

However, time proved that communicative-based methods did not resulted in quicker and more efficient learning of the second language. Consequently, as pointed out by Sönmes and Griffiths [13], there was a change towards a more eclectic tendency and grammar in SLT regained strength.

Ellis [14] stresses that the decline of the communicative and naturalistic method was an unequivocal sign of the necessity of including grammar in the process of teaching and learning of the L2. Likewise, scholars such as Pawlak [15] also shared this view and asserted that failure in naturalistic communication based practices gave way to an interest towards grammar.

Although the Educational Law in Spain urges teachers to use the communicative approach, the reality is that

textbooks tend to follow an eclectic approach, trying to be as balanced as possible. Others, such as Sañudo [16] defend the idea of grammar not being so important. In this regard, in his view 'not always the students in has a greater grammar control is the best communicator' ([16]: 274). He also wonders whether being the educational system immersed in the communicative method, it would be necessary to practice pure grammar structures, let alone if we take into consideration how time consuming learning a second language is. In line with this idea, it would be utterly unfeasible to teach grammar inductively in the class, since time should definitely be devoted to other tasks in order to obtain sound results.

3. Innovation and Its Relation in SLA

As previously mentioned, it is often wrongly believed that the mere fact of using some ICT tool implies being innovative. Indeed, it adds up to cater for the Digital Competence that the Curriculum urges to foment in the classroom (Royal Decree 1105/2014 and Competence Order ECD/65/2015 [17].

However, ICTs should be regarded as a support in the teaching and learning process which must be accompanied by some pedagogical proposal. Scholars such as Onrubia [18] suggests that the mere implementation of the ICTs does not necessarily mean innovation, but is rather the way teachers implement this flexible tool in education what matters.

M.A and Vivas [19] point out that SLT allows teachers to make use of endless resources to give an innovative touch to the teaching practise and keep away from the tedious textbook. In fact, the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) give way use more innovative and fresher ideas. For instance, here we could make reference to the digital board and overhead projectors, which cannot only be seen as visual support system, but as helpful system for the creation of collaborative projects.

Somehow, being innovative implies using everything within the teacher's hand in order to cater for diversity in the classroom. In this respect, it should also be noted Fleming and Mills's VARK model [10], whose notions are based on the previous VAK model proposed by Barbe. The VARK models stand for the four sensory modalities, namely visual, auditory, reading and writing and kinaesthetic learning. For instance, visual learners have a preference for seeing, auditory learners perform better though listening tasks, reading and writing learners prefer written texts since they enjoy them and also emphasise text-based input and output. Kinesthetic learners prefer to learn through experience, such as moving, touching and all in all doing.

In line with the aforementioned, Gadner's in this theory of the Multiple Intelligences [9] acknowledges that there is not a unique intelligence through which students can learn a language, but each one owns at least eight intelligences which may be present in different degrees depending on the interest or capacity of each learner. Carrillo y López [20] best summarise this theory in the following points:

- Linguistic intelligence: students who have this intelligence are able to use language in a different and creative way. It is usually developed by people such as writers, lawyers, among others. They like activities such as crossword puzzles, short stories, articles, essays, writing poems, listening to a storyteller, reading out loud, etc.
- Logical-mathematical intelligence: in which rational and logical thinking come into play. This intelligence is usually present in doctors, engineering, ICT workers, among others. They like dominoes, searching for patterns in the classroom, school, outdoors, creating a timeline, making up analogies, using money, playing logic games, etc.
- Bodily-Kinesthetic intelligence: in which students present a solid control and body coordination. Dancers and sports people would be a good example of people having this intelligence. They like activities such as performing scenes from books and plays, playing games like Twister and Simon Says, searching for items, acting out concepts, physical education activities, using mimic, etc.
- Musical intelligence: in which students develop a very find hearing skills present compositors, musicians, and alike. They like activities such as writing their own songs, putting original lyrics to music and performing them for the class, listening to music from different historical periods, use rhythm and clapping to memorize concepts, write rap music and rhymes, etc.
- Visual-spatial intelligence: this intelligence provides the brain with the enough elasticity to establish and create models in the mind, it also enables students to acquire the so-called 'photographic memory', which is present in architects, painters and the like. They like creating posters, sketching stories, making 3D projects, illustrate stories, take notes using mind mapping, describing pictures and taking photographs as well as using models such as charts, visual maps, diagrams, timelines, etc.
- Interpersonal intelligence: it involves the capacity to develop and keep good relationships with the people of the environment, which can be observed in teachers, politics, psychologists, among others. They like working in cooperative groups and pairs, interviewing people with knowledge on certain topics, tutoring younger students or classmates, doing activities which imply discussing and sharing, etc.
- Intrapersonal intelligence: this intelligence is present in people who are able to know themselves, which in turn help them to organise in a more effective way throughout his/her day to day. They like writing reflective papers, essays, autobiographies, writing goals for the future and planning ways to achieve them, using software that allows them to work alone, working on projects individually, reading independently, etc.
- Natural intelligence: which enable students to perceive, appreciate and understand the organization of nature, which is present in biologists, farmers, forest ranges, among others. They like working on environmental projects, going on field trips, learning things related to nature and astronomy, etc.

All in all, the bottom line is that whatever the way we approach our teaching method is, what really counts is for students to have different opportunities to improve and build their learning. It is then the teachers' responsibility to know how to apply the theoretical models in the teaching and learning process.

Juan y García also coincide with one of the Gardner's intelligence, as is the case of musical intelligence. In this sense, the authors state that 'most of us would surely agree on the idea that songs, once learned, are very difficult to forget' ([21]:169). It is true that when it comes to learning a foreign language, songs usually gather everything that we need, from determined grammar patterns, vocabulary, sociocultural elements to prosodic elements, such as intonation, pitch and stress. Added to all these facts, it is no doubt that music mostly appeals to everyone.

Using a variety of music styles in the classroom certainly will contribute to engage to the great majority of students. Teachers could even take students' interests into account and carry out surveys to know what type of music could work for them. Moreover, it should also be mentioned that studies on music have come to prove that it improves concentration, memory and helps to decrease stress levels. All the more reason to opt for using music for something else that just teach concepts in the classroom. In this sense, background music can help students to come back to calm after the break, or mark transitions in the classroom from one topic to another.

Psychoanalysts such as Erikson [22] also agrees on the idea that when teachers use authentic materials in the classrooms, whether they are games, photographs, or objects, the level of engagement and motivation increases notoriously. Scholars such as Wright, Betterdige and Bucky [23] also share this view and highlight that the use of games in the foreign language classroom would add that necessary extra stimulus and interest for the language since students feel more comfortable and relaxed, giving way to an increase in self-esteem at the same time.

In line with the previous idea, Juan and García [21] postulate a classification of games according their typology. For examples:

- Information gap games: in which the classmate has to obtain the information that only the other classmate knows.
- Puzzle games: it needs of group cooperation in order to reach to the final solution.
- Matching games: students will have to establish a communication in order to find out the match (some photo, etc). Normally, communication is established to offer descriptions that the students is looking for.
- Interchange games: students will have to interchange information and materials that they do not need but perhaps is needed by others in order to complete the task.
- Role games: each student acquire a fictional identity that they will have to perform in order to carry out their task successfully.
- Simulation games: students will have to carry out different everyday situations, trying to perform the task in the most realistic way possible.

The versatility of the games aforementioned make possible to implement them physically in the classroom or through the use of applications which allow the creation of these types of games. These tools could be either *Kahoot*, which is an online platform that helps to create different educative games or even through the use of *EducaLim*, which allows to create virtual books full of interactive activities.

In a nutshell, innovation gives way to endless combinations, which must follow a rational and pedagogic criterion in order to help students to reach the goals in a more entertaining way. Additionally, following this line of making lessons more attractive to students, we also find learning through projects. In this respect, this perspective of teaching advocates for working with the contents in an interdisciplinary way alongside with the key competences. Certainly, working interdisciplinarly provides a richer context to engage students in the learning of contents in a more realistic way, where students are asked to work collaboratively in order to reach an outcome which must be tangible (a mural, poster, video, posts, etc).

Likewise, interdisciplinarity can also be worked through other ground-breaking methodologies, such as Content and Language Integrated Learning or CLIL. This term, first coined by David Marsh and Anne Maljers in 1994, advocates for language immersion in conjunction with content-based instruction. In the same way, it can be easily integrated alongside technologies or projects.

In order to successfully implement CLIL lessons, there should be combined elements pertaining to the Coyle 4Cs (1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2005, 2008, 2010) [24], In this respect we find.

- Content: where understanding is related to elements from a determined area of the curriculum (geography, history, mathematics, science, music, physical education, arts and crafts, etc).
- Communication: where the language is the vehicle through which contents are worked.
- Cognition: since learning takes place out of a process of association between the concept being taught and the language in use.
- Culture: this methodology necessarily needs of exposure to alternatives that raise awareness among students of the other perspective than theirs.

4. Brief Description of the Object of Analysis: The Present Simple

The teaching of the present simple tense usually takes place at the beginning of the course, especially if we take into account ESO 1st year. However, in spite of the fact that it seems to be a bit simple, the reality is that the number of mistakes that are spotted in learners are surprisingly notorious. In fact, this problem is even more exacerbated as the course goes by. Because of this, we can infer that it is likely that grammar explanations have not permeated in students properly. In addition, numerous students which will be further explain in the following subsections, coincide in that mistakes are even spotted at higher level, such as at university.

Professors Gogo and Kelani (Gogo & Kelani, 2016), on their part, stress that 'tense is a very strong factor as far as subject-verb agreement is concerned' (p. 24). In fact, present simple is the tense which gets more affected by the strength of the subject-verb agreement. Additionally, it must be noted that present simple does not necessarily

make reference to a present affair, since it can also refer to states or scientific facts, as in 'water boils at 100º Celsius', or even to talk about the future 'the train leaves tomorrow at 12.00 PM'.

In this vein, Gogo and Kelani [25] warn that the problem does not only come in the 3º person singular pronoun, but by other verbs which are governed by other rules, such as '*to have*', '*to do*', and '*to be*'. Yet we will frame the verb '*to do*' within the verbs whose declination would fit in the '-es' group.

Before getting into the matter *per se*, we shall gain an insight into some of the most relevant cognitive schemes which address the importance of the error in SLT and its treatment.

5. The Error in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language: Theoretical Delimitations

In order to try to sort out a given problem in the L2 classroom, we must understand where the problem is rooted and why. To do so, it is deemed essential to carry out a theoretical revision and subcategorization through some of the most relevant theories in the SLA field.

Lado [26] proposed his theory of the Contrastive Analysis. This theory appeared as a necessity to explain every single error that second language students committed. In this way, Lado tried to echo the existing differences and similarities between both languages and how they interfered in the process of acquisition, so that once the errors were spotted, it would be easier to teach the language. This theory considered errors as something negative within the teaching and learning process.

However, Chomsky's innatist theory [27] postulated that there was a lack of explanation for those errors which were different from the errors of transfer between the L1 and L2. In this way, he tried to explain why a student committed some errors different from the linguistic structures of his L1, and it was because the student had not previously been in contact with those structures.

These theories served as the starting point for one of the most renowned theories in the second language panorama: the theory of the Error Analysis (EA). Postulated by Corder in two different articles in 1967 and 1971, the EA theory regarded error as a *sine qua non* condition to carry out learning in the L2. In this way, Corder [28] stressed that, through errors, we could know in which L2 acquisition stage the learner was. Corder also suggested a definition of error as he saw it as the use of a linguistic particle in such a way that the native speaker of the language would regard it as a sample or incorrect or incomplete learning. Regarding this point, Chele [29] offers a broader vision of the concept of error in the teaching and learning process and sees it as a 'unacceptable way (…) which represents a deviation from the standard used by a linguistic community' (2015, p. 34). In this vein, Chele added that the error is not only badly regarded by every speaker of the language, not even for those who learned the language from birth.

Corder's EA theory also established a distinction between *competence error* and *performance error*. While competence errors represented a lack of knowledge of the linguistic norm on the student's side so that it becomes something systematic, performance errors were errors which did not occur systematically, but they happened by external factors such as the lack of concentration, tiredness, motivation, among others. Performance errors were later recognised as mistakes since they could also get corrected immediately by the students him/herself.

Corder also was the precursor of the theory of the intralanguage. In this theory, we could observe overgeneralization errors (application of the same rule to every single case), for instance 'she work as a teacher' or simplification such as 'I like', where in order to say in Spanish '*me gusta*', the student omits the direct object 'it' in the sentence.

James [30] describes intralingual errors as 'those which come from an incomplete or incorrect learning of the target language, rather than transfer error between the L1 and the L2' ([30]: 182). Thus, the author distinguishes between 2 types of errors:

1. Learning strategy based errors, among we can highlight errors such as false analogies, application of incomplete rules, abuse of redundancy, incorrect analysis, which usually take place when the student has got a wrong conception of the rule. For instance, 'its them' to say 'son ellos', since in this case the students would assume that 'its' is the plural form of 'it'. Another example proposed by James [30] would be the error by omission of co-occurrence, which takes place when the learner does not know that some rules are usually accompanied by some particles such as prepositions, complements, etc.

Other errors are those of the hypercorrection, which take place much the same way as in Corder's theory. For instance, 'Do you can speak English?'. As observed, although it is an interrogative sentence, the verb 'can' does not need of the auxiliary verb 'do' or 'does' to make up an interrogative structure.

2. Communication strategy-based errors, which take place as a result of approximation strategies. For instance, through the use of synonyms and antonyms 'I'm not happy' instead of saying 'I'm sad'. Moreover, we can also find errors related to strategies such as circumlocution, which try 'to express a concept indirectly by allusion, rather than by direct reference' [31].

James [30] also alludes to a third type of error: induced errors. These errors occur as a result of what happens in the classroom. For instance, owing to induced errors in materials, or those committed by the teacher him/herself when speaking, pedagogical priorities taken in the class, among others.

In line with the aforementioned, we can also highlight Selinker's [32] theory of Interlanguage, which regarded errors as an indicator of the progress that learners were making towards the target language. This theory postulated that a learner's interlanguage was a linguistic system forged by the learner's knowledge of the L2 and governed by his/her own rules. Additionally, Baralo [33] points out that 'this linguistic system evolves more and more turning into a more complex one' ([33]: 373). Although in the creation of the linguistic system we can find traces of both the learner's L1 and the L2, it could not be considered to be a mixture of both linguistic systems either since the learner makes up his/her own rules.

On the other hand, Selinker [32] highlights 5 elements which make up the learner's interlanguage. These ones are: (i) transfer of the L1, which are errors that take place in the learner due to the interference that the L1 makes in the learning process; (ii) overgeneralization, which, as aforementioned, makes refers to the application of the rule in linguistic construction that, because of its similarity in the construction that rule follows, takes the leaner to apply the rule as in 'he doesn't speaks' or 'he don't speak'. (iii) Transfer by instruction, which is produced as a result of what the learner has acquired after having received some input; (iv) learning strategies, which are made up by the mechanisms that the learner carries out in order to acquire the instruction that he/she has received and; (v) communication strategies, which are the mechanisms that learners activates in order to overcome idiomatic problems in order to establish successful communication.

Lastly, the theory of the Interlanguage gave rise to one of the most accepted definitions in the SLA panorama, commonly used to refer to the internalization of errors in the learner's linguistic system: the process of fossilization. An error gets fossilized when it gets stuck in the learner's interlanguage, which in turn impedes that the learner can increase his/her competence level in the target language at different points: grammar, pronunciation, lexis, or even discourse. However, given the focus of this paper, we will only deal with fossilization of linguistic phenomena at grammar level.

6. Typology of Errors in Subject-Verb Agreement

The following section is aimed at dealing with the most common types of errors related with the subject-verb agreement related-studies. Thus, we find that most of the authors in our literature review concur with the idea that subject-verb agreement in present simple positive statements is one of the most salient aspects regarding errors that learners commit.

For AL Noori, AL Shamary and Yasin [31] 'writing in the foreign language must be regarded as the final product of the grammatical mastering and lexical knowledge' (p. 434). In fact, subject-verb agreement was the most frequent error in their study with a rate of occurrence of 95.5%. Karim, Fathema and Hakim [34] concur in this respect and point out that writing is the ultimate skill to be acquired, since it is not an innate skill ([34]: 50). Although in their study they did not show any percentage of occurrence, the control group composed by 36 students were given a writing task from which 47 errors were related to subject-verb agreement. Quite a high quantity if we take into account how small the sample is.

Gogo and Kelani [25] in their study found that 47% of errors pertained to subject-verb agreement. In order to provide an explanation for such quantity of mistakes, Nayan [1] postulated that students find it difficult to deal with subject-verb agreement because they do not really have same rule in their L1. In this vein, Nayan [1] suggests that errors chiefly stem from the difference between Indonesian language and the English language (mind the fact that the research analysed so far pertained to Arabic and Malaysian students).

In line with this idea, AL Noori, AL Shamary and Yasin [31] point out that the problem may lie in the origin of the language family. In this vein, while Arabic and Malaysian is a Semitic language (branch of the Afroasiatic language family originating in the Middle East), English belongs to the Indo-European family. Therefore, this fact poses an added problem as far as learning English a second language is concerned owing to the syntactic-grammatical, lexical, as well as morphological and phonological differences.

Parallel to such cases, it must be noted that subject-verb agreement either in English and Spanish is also different inasmuch as they present different declinations as well. However, this topic is being incipient in Spain as we did not find any type of contrastive analysis nor study related to this topic. In this regard, the lack of solid foundations as far as Spanish secondary students is concerned may result in hampering the identification of the type of error between Spanish and English.

For this reason, we find it convenient to make reference to Robinson's [35] exhaustive typology of errors. In his study we find:

1. **The subject does not seem to be plural**, **but it is**. In this sense, Robinson [35] reminds us that the English language contains irregular plural, different from the Spanish language. Therefore, it seems to be central to raise awareness among students about the existence of them. In order to do so, Robinson [35] advises to ask whether we are talking about one or more in the sentence. Some of these subjects could be either 'children' (niños/as), 'women' (mujeres) or 'feet' (pies).

2. **The subject is an uncountable noun**. Words such as 'sadness, 'love' or 'water' and the like are uncountable, therefore we must treat them as singular subjects. That is to say, if we simplified the subject, those words will turn to be 'it'. Consequently, we would have to add '-s' or '-es' at the end of the verb.

3. **Words that are found between the subject and the verb**. In this point, Robinson [35] establishes that, in numerous occasions, students do not know how to identify the subject properly. In addition, this fact gets aggravated if we find words or some combination of words between the subject and the verb. In order to understand this idea let's consider the following example:

'The potatoes in the fridge are left over from last night'
(Las patatas en el frigorífico se quedaron de anoche [de la noche])
'The potatoes in the fridge is left over from last night'*.

The sentence where the asterisk appears in the incorrect one. In this sense, we should wonder whether the fridge or the potatoes were left over. As pointed out by Robinson [35], it would be the potatoes, since 'in the fridge' would be a prepositional phrase of place. In other words, students must know what a subject is: the element which carries out the action, or who receives it, as in this case. In this respect, as the author well mentions, it would be a flagrant error to only take into consideration the noun that appears before the verb.

4. **The subject is a relative pronoun (who, which or that)**. First, let's consider the following examples:

'This course is not for **people** who **hate** writing'

'She met a **man** who **works** for the phone company'

The relative pronoun 'who' would be the subject in the previous sentences. Yet agreement with the verb will depend on the word that 'who' makes reference to in each sentence. Thus, while in the first sentence 'who' makes reference to 'people' (irregular plural), in the second sentence 'who' makes reference to 'man' (singular), therefore in this case we should add the ending '-s' to the verb.

However, there are many more complex examples that can be addressed in this point. For instance, Chele [29] stresses that the relative pronoun 'which' cast a lot of doubt since it turns out to be difficult to recognise whether in many cases this is referring to the preceding noun or to the noun that initiates the sentence. This is the case of the subordinate sentences in which the relative pronoun may refer back to the previous sentence. Let's consider the following samples drawn by Chele [29]:

'This is **one of the factors** which encourage**s** people to impact environment negatively'

In this case, we notice that 'which' has been attributed 'one' instead of 'factors', therefore it is understandable that students tend to identify the noun phrase that 'which' makes reference to wrongly.

'Natural resources are faced with **the problem of pollution and exhaustion** which in turn become**s** dangerous to human lives'

As observed, 'which' has been attributed the reference form the previous sentence 'the problem of…'. Yet in spite of the important points here mentioned, it would be rather unfeasible to teach these aspects alongside present simple tense at the beginning of the course since we would be mixing up two different grammar points: (i) present simple tense and; (ii) relative pronouns.

5. **The verb appears before the subject**. One of the main errors that Robinson [35] highlights is that of the widespread confusion when building up sentences where the verb appears before the subject since at a cognitive level, the brain must modify the verb before actually uttering the subject that the verb makes reference to. For instance:

There are apples on the table

There is a snowstorm in the mountain

When we change the logical order of the sentence, the student may not identify the type of subject that follows the verb. For this reason, it may mislead them when carrying out the subject-verb agreement. Additionally, let's consider another example where the verb must be placed before the subject.

Why **are** those lions so nervous?

In order to avoid any mistake, Robinson [35] advises to first identify the verb of the sentence and, then, identify the subject of the sentence through questions such as about who or what the sentence deals with.

6. **The subject is an indefinite pronoun (such as each, anybody or both)**. Indefinite pronouns definitely pose a problem to students in order to make subject-verb agreement, since the subject somehow is being hidden. Therefore, it would be essential to explain from the beginning that, at most, indefinite pronouns must be treated as singular pronouns. Robinson [35] identifies a set of pronouns where this rule would always apply,

namely one, anyone, everyone, someone, nobody, anybody, everybody, somebody, nothing, anything, everything, something, each, either and neither. Some examples of this rules which are commonly found alongside present simple tense in secondary textbooks are:

Nobody works in this office

Everybody is happy in this town

Professors Gogo and Kelani [25] have established a distinction to this respect. Following these authors, and taking into account the proximity principle, we find the following aspects which acquire a more complex treat.

The first case would pertain to the indefinite pronouns 'neither' or 'either'. Thus, we must take into account that the verb is conjugated depending on the noun that precedes it. For example:

Neither I nor my **cousins** are at the concert right now

Neither that girl nor **Shaun** is at the concert right now*

In these previous example we can observe that the verb TO BE is conjugated accordingly with the noun that precedes the verb. However, the sentence where the asterisk appears would change the concordance if the sentence were as follows:

Neither that girl nor Shaun are **friends** anymore

In this case, the subject of the sentence changes to 'friends', therefore the verb TO BE must agree with the plural subject.

Additionally, as far as the indefinite pronoun 'either' is concerned, we find an identical case. Let's consider the following examples:

Either my mum or my **aunts** are in the bathroom

Either the teacher or the **students** like the new timetable ([25]: 24)

As happened with the indefinite pronoun 'neither', the nouns that precede the verbs are the ones which mark the agreement.

On the other hand, Gogo and Kelani [25] point out another aspect to take into account within this same point. Thus, if we find sentences which are followed by 'as well as', 'apart from', 'in conjunction with', 'accompanied by' or 'with', the verb must agree with the noun that initiates the sentence. In this regard, Gogo and Kelani [25] provide the following examples:

The girl together with the boys lives in Ibadan

Aminu as well as his wife, is praying

Lastly, Robinson [31] points out that the only indefinite pronoun that can be treated as plural is 'both', since this word makes reference to two different subjects. For example:

Both of them are my friends

Both work at an important company

As a final recommendation, Robinson [35] advises to make some proofreading to verify whether agreements have successfully been carried out.

7. Conclusions

Delving into the different theoretical points in order to get an insight into one of the commonest errors found in students from secondary education has shown the lack of studies concerning acquisition of the L2 present simple tense in Spanish students. In this respect, it could be stated

that the issue lacks of interest of the scientific community. However, it is a well-known fact that errors in the use of present simple tense is an actual fact, widespread in society even in higher education stages, such as at university.

Therefore, one of the main takeaways lies on the fact that there is a problem that needs weeding out right from the lower layers of the educational system. In this way, changes are that the problem will diminish in the future. However, this issue is easier said than done since the legislation in force the Spanish curriculum comes into conflict with grammar-based sessions. On top of this, it must be noted the fact that teaching grammar *per se*, let alone focusing on drilling are far from making the session appealing to the student. All these factors in conjunction with the affective factors that we always find in students, truly pose a problem to learn grammar efficiently. That is why there is an impending necessity for teachers to look for new ways of redefining the teaching experience.

The literature review has stressed that communicative and naturalistic-based methods have not really improved grammar acquisition in students as much as it was thought it would do. In fact, recent studies have found that subject-verb agreement is still the most repetitive error in students, yet those studies have not been carried out with Spanish students, which share some roots with the English language as far as the proto-Indo-European roots are concerned. Nonetheless, it is likely that results are similar to those already collected (AL Noori, AL Shamary and Yasin, 2015; Karim, Fathema and Hakim, 2015; Gogo and Kelani, 2016) since we must bear in mind that Spanish derives from Latin whereas English pertains to a sub branch of Low Germanic. Thus, not sharing any treat in the inflection of verbs.

Taking into account the aforementioned, it seems to be clear that teachers and scholars should hold themselves accountable for the creation of new materials which are in line with the present curriculum. In this respect, textbooks seem to be no longer a central element for the teaching of English as a foreign language, especially grammar. We must take into account that textbooks represent a standardised version of what the curriculum needs. However, the context where the teaching practice takes places alongside with the idiosyncrasy of the classroom itself show the need for materials which cater for diversity in the classroom.

In this sense, new lines of research should be opened so that professionals in the area feel encouraged to combine innovative tools, namely collaborative projects, use of multiple intelligences to appeal for diversity or even introduce gamification as a way to keep motivation levels high, always taking into consideration current research (such as that of Robinson, 2015) and new research on the field in order to know with exactitude where the problem really lies on and how it must be tackled and oriented in the teaching practice.

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